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ABSTRACT

Described in this document are elements of a child-directed curriculum as implemented in the context of an academic nursery school. The teacher's role in adult-child interactions is seen as one that involves (1) learning emotionally, intellectually, and contextually from children; (2) focusing on the child's immediate needs, thereby motivating learning; (3) participating in dialogues with children; (4) listening to the child in a directed manner to perceive what evokes his or her curiosity and emotional response; (5) probing into the imagining and inquiries of the child; (6) reassuring the child by showing personal warmth and caring and giving much positive emotional support; (7) quietly expecting from children high levels of involvement in learning without resorting to antagonistic coercion or provoking frustration or hurry; (8) expecting that any child can succeed brilliantly; (9) reducing competition between children by talking and listening to each child; and (10) using fortuitous events and surprises to further the individual child's learning. (RH)

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Teacher As Learner in the Academic Nursery School

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Three year old Justin and I sat talking together in a child-teacher session.

"Justin, what word would you like to learn today?"

"Chomper."

"Chomper? What's a chomper?"

"Something what you chomp with."

"What does it mean to chomp, Justin?"

"It's a game."

"Oh, I see, it's a game. What kind of game? How do you you play it?"

"You take the chomper and chomp holes in papers."

I laughed because I realized Justin was explaining to me what a hole puncher was. He and members of his class had been writing their favorite words on note cards, punching a hole in the corner of the cards, and fastening them with a ring binder. Justin and the other two and three year olds in my class loved this ritual. They enjoyed telling me their own magical words, tracing the word that had been written out for them and--as discovered that day--even liked the hole punching. To them every step was a game.

DYNAMICS OF ADULT-CHILD INTERACTION

The dynamics of adult-child interaction are never more significant than during the nursery school age of two to five. Nursery school teachers often cannot anticipate what to expect

from a child. Justin was full of surprises.

"What do you want to spell now, Justin?"

"Floppy disks."

"Floppy disks?" I considered that a very unexpected term coming from a three year old. "What's a floppy disk?"

"It's one of these. . . ." He reached over and opened the window to the disk drive on the computer and pulled a floppy disk part way out. "You put it in the computer and Peter Robot comes on!"

I had been working with some computer assisted reading and math instruction and Peter Robot was the animated character produced by the software package. Justin had done some detective work to find out what those things were he saw me put in the computer. I had avoided saying floppy disks because I thought nursery children would not understand.

Inability to predict a child's interests and knowledge requires that the effective, responsive teacher continually be learning emotionally, intellectually, and contextually from the children (Graves, 1983).

CHILD DIRECTED CURRICULUM

In order to achieve optimal immediate and long-term learning effects, the teacher needs to derive most of each child's day-to-day curricular content from the child. By doing so the teacher constantly focuses on the child's immediate needs, and thereby motivates learning. Curricular content that is child-directed

demands that the teacher engage in dialogue with the children (Ashton-Warner, 1980).

Teacher-student dialogue is one in which listening takes precedence for the teacher (Bettelheim and Zelan, 1981). The teacher's central focus is not on traditional telling from a personal frame of reference, but on perceiving what evokes the child's curiosity and emotional response. Instead of being random or laissez-faire, listening is directed and requires the teacher to probe into the imaginings and inquiries of the child.

Discovering what a child means is not always easy, as Leslie taught me.

"Teacher Vanessa, I want to learn 'stopit'."

"'Stopit'?"

"Yes, I want to learn 'stopit'."

This time she really had me stumped. "Why do you want to learn 'stopit'?"

"Because that's what my mom always says to me, 'Stop it, Leslie!'"

To make sense of a child's words, the teacher explores the child's inner world and learns more about that world and how to communicate its joys and fears.

In child-directed learning the teacher must recognize and utilize the child's interests. Two year old Cameron's greatest joy is imitating Superman. He always dresses like him and tries to fly all around the nursery school. He would seem to be a "hyper" child, since he is busy flying all around and being a hero. It is hard to pull him back to earth. Learning how to write down and read about his fantasies opened up a whole new world for him, and he was happy to settle down and learn.

Levi was terrified of the computer. When I first placed the head phones on him he stretched them out as far as he could and pulled them away from his ears. As soon as he saw the robot on the screen, he forgot about the head phones and dropped them; he put his hands over the robot and started to cry. I comforted him and put a piece of paper over the screen covering the robot. Soon, he grew curious and let me uncover parts of the robot, until gradually his fear turned to fascination, and he started to tell me about his new friend the robot.

Emotionally charged thoughts like "Stopit", "Superman", and "Robot" are what the teacher is looking for. They are the thoughts that have an enchanting and magical content for the child and cause the child to be interested in and later recognize their words (Stauffer, 1970). Such magic is in all thoughts most significant and deeply felt by the child.

Verbal dialogue between teacher and student is an important part of child-teacher interaction and requires the teacher be alert and attentive to the various attitudes and behaviors of

the child.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT TO THE CHILD

Many nursery school curricula put the children on a very structured schedule so that the child has little control. The curriculum I implement is less structured. In addition to daily group activities, each child is given a few minutes of one-on-one time with the teacher for concentrated, interactive learning. During this time the child tells his teacher what his magical thoughts are. The teacher acts as a special kind of aid--a mental midwife to help in the birth of these thoughts and to teach the child the ways to express them and recognize them in print. To bring about this birth, the teacher first reassures the child by showing personal warmth and caring. Critical to the success of this program is the fact that the child is given much positive emotional support. Inviting emotionally charged comments from the child, complementing frequently but validly, noticing new things and touching are all part of allowing the child to express deep feelings with confidence and even excitement. Leslie has helped me learn how important positive feedback is to children. She is indeed a little lady and she is always dressed up.

"Leslie, you look so pretty today!"

She beams and shakes her head up and down when I tell her. To her it is a great compliment. One day she repaid me by saying, "You're cute and I love you!"

Leslie always comes up with the most descriptive words, and I usually tell her so. One day I neglected to tell her; she looked sad.

"What's wrong, Leslie?"

"You're supposed to tell me that that was a good word."

The teacher's continual display of genuine caring and concern increases the child's willingness to openly approach and communicate with the teacher. The teacher who uses this verbal and nonverbal interaction will be admitted into the child's magical world. As a result, the teacher will learn more and will be able to reach out more effectively to each child.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS ARE IMPORTANT

Supportive, warm, interested responses to the child may seem incompatible with the equally important teacher attitude of high expectations. Best results occur when the expectations for the child are very high (Kawallis, 1983). A quiet type of expectation, one that is felt by the teacher but not forced upon the child, is best. I expect children to give me a new word they want to learn every few minutes, but I do not push them. I try to make learning as much of a game as possible so the children will stretch and come very close to my high expectations.

The little child should not be antagonistically coerced, frustrated, or hurried (Elkind, 1981). On the other hand, the teacher should have the feeling that any child can succeed bril-

liantly. Every child, even the very young, those labelled as "slow", and the handicapped, can be very successful learners. High expectations make available to the child rich, challenging and even adult-level opportunities and provide the invitation to explore, experiment, and attempt to master them. Nothing is presumed to be too difficult. The way children learn to speak is a good example. Fluent speakers address children from birth. Adult speech is not diluted, structured, or kept from babies because it is complex and beyond immediate mastery. It is presented naturally, and the child samples from the richness of it.

Thus rich, challenging options and invitations rather than dull, structured drill and coercion characterize the ideal child-teacher interactive. As a consequence, our preschool academics program is non-competitive and is geared toward the individual. The real strength in the individualized dialogue is that instead of a teacher talking to many children with emphasis on a one-way presentation, the teacher talks and listens to each child. This greatly reduces the competitive aspect in learning. The child tells the teacher the words he wants to learn and the books he wants to author and read; in essence, he establishes his own learning. Competition is not intrinsic to this system, as it is in most large groups where uniform task situations are constant reminders of "who is first?" and "who did the most?".

In most group situations the students do not get to talk privately with the teacher. When the child does get an opportunity

to speak, he is usually forced to talk about what everyone is talking about. The interaction is usually general and not personal. Incidents of students talking with teachers about particular interests is low, or when it occurs is discouraged. A common response from the teacher in a group situation to an inquisitive child is "let's get back to the topic."

Individuals who implement a child-directed program will find that they will encounter many surprises as they work with children. The children I work with surprise me by learning things I have not intended to teach. I write out and at the same time spell and sound out the words they give me. As a result the children not only learn the words but the alphabet, motor skills, and phonics. Children want to take over the role of their teacher and teach their peers. Roxanne, one of my three year olds, for example, delights in being able to teach her little brother.

Children are so willing and anxious to learn . . . and to teach. It is so important for us to be continually teaching them and learning from them. In order to teach we must learn; to learn we must listen; and to listen we must be with and be a part of the children.

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